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AXIS OFFENSIVE MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST THE CONTINENTAL
UNITED STATES: OPPORTUNITY LOST

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Research and analysis revealed the Axis offensive against the United States during World War II failed due to the lack of a campaign plan to guide it. The Axis leadership correctly identified U.S. centers of gravity and had the capability to strike them, yet they failed to unify their effort or allocate adequate resources to the offensive. Finally, they failed to act while the opportunity existed in early 1942. The study of this offensive yields many implications for the United States today. These concern contemporary Anti-Submarine Warfare, Mine Countermeasures, terrorism, industrial sabotage, U.S. military focus on the Caribbean and the assignment of responsibility for the homeland defense mission to a regional CINC.

Axis Grand Strategy

The conduct of World War II by the Axis powers was highlighted by operational brilliance yet doomed by strategic failure. In the course of Axis offensive operations against the United States, operational failure was just as prevalent in the attacks that were made, as was the deficiency of strategic direction. The lack of a coordinated Axis campaign against the continental U.S. during the primary window of opportunity in early 1942 is a matter of history, yet it bears a series of implications for the United States today.

Both the Germans and Japanese failed to follow through on their stated grand strategies in 1942 by neglecting a coordinated campaign against the continental U.S. Prime Minister Tojo concluded "we must take every possible step, within the limits of our national power, to force the United States... to remain on the defensive."¹ Nazi strategy centered on defeating Russia while wearing down Britain and the U.S. by a protracted sea war.² Implied in this strategy is a strike at U.S. centers of gravity contained in American industrial capability and will of the people, as well as the source of military support for Britain. The Axis powers both recognized the need to take the war to the American homeland and had the national power to do it.

German Offensive Operations

German offensive operations against the continental United States consisted of the U-boat offensive (including East Coast mine laying) and Operation Pastorius, the insertion of two teams of saboteurs by U-boats in June, 1942. Both were considered strategic in nature and were personally ordered by Hitler himself, who wanted to "inaugurate a continuing reminder to the US of its vulnerability to German power."³ Ultimately this would strike at the American will to fight by causing the people to doubt the capability of its leaders and accept the inevitability of defeat, even from an overwhelming distance.⁴

While the U-boat offensive is well documented, Operation Pastorius is not. Named after Franz Daniel Pastorius, the leader of the first community of immigrant Germans in the U.S., it consisted of a two-pronged commando insertion of two four-man teams. On the night of June 12, 1942 the first team was inserted by a small boat from U-202 which was surfaced 50 yards off the beach at Amagansett, N.Y. On the night of June 16, 1942 the second team was landed by U-584 by the same method just south of Jacksonville at Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. Each team wore military garb to avoid being shot as spies in case of capture, and carried enough equipment and explosives to conduct a two-year plan of sabotage. The Mason-

Dixon Line formed the delineation between the spheres of operation of the Northern and Southern teams⁵, whose objectives were as follows:

(1) Wholesale industrial sabotage of aluminum and light metal plants, power plants and railroad facilities throughout the east.

- Blow up Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) plants in Massena, N.Y., Alcoa, Tennessee and East St. Louis, Ill and the Cryolite Co. aluminum base plant in Philadelphia.
- Knock out the New York City water supply system.
- Destroy the Hell Gate bridge in NYC, one of the most vital railway bridges in the country.
- Disrupt inland waterways by blowing up locks and canals in the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers between Cincinnati and St. Louis.
- Destroy the Niagara Falls hydroelectric plant.
- Bomb key rail facilities, including the Pennsylvania Railroad eastern terminal station in Newark, NJ, the famous horseshoe curve near Altoona, Pa., and bridges and other vital points along the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway.
- (Another easy target expected by the Navy Department was a U-boat launched commando raid to cut the Florida Keys road and communications to isolate the Naval Air Station and port at Key West)⁶

(2) Arouse popular feeling against German-Americans through nuisance and terror explosions in the hope that antagonism against German-Americans would bond this group into a fifth column movement in the U.S. At the same time the activity would demoralize the American population and war effort by:

- Planting time bombs in lockers at railroad stations and in department stores to create panic and break down civilian morale.⁷

While the southern team made it safely to Jacksonville as planned, the northern team was discovered by the U.S. Coast Guard beach patrol. All of the Germans were later rounded up after their leader, George Dasch, turned himself in to the

FBI. It is not known whether he just got cold feet or he was a Soviet double agent, intending to sway U.S. public opinion towards quickly opening a second front in Europe to relieve the pressure on Russia.⁸ In either case, German General Erwin Von Lahousen labeled Operation Pastorius as "the biggest blunder that ever occurred in (German intelligence)."⁹

Japanese Offensive Operations

Japanese offensive operations against the continental United States consisted of two cases of shelling of the West Coast with submarine deck guns, three bombing attempts by a submarine-launched seaplane, limited attacks on coastal shipping and a bizarre barrage of explosive balloons.

The first shelling attack came on 23 February 1942 by the submarine I-17. Firing ten shells at the Ellwood Oil Field in the Santa Barbara Channel, she caused minor damage but created a state of panic on the California Coast. The next evening a false alarm of an air raid set off a fireworks show of antiaircraft fire in Los Angeles. The second shelling attack came on 21 June 1942 when the submarine I-25 fired 17 shells in the direction of Fort Stevens, Oregon, causing no damage. After the war it was revealed that the actual target was the nearby naval seaplane base at Astoria, Oregon. This attack

was the first on a continental U.S. military base by a foreign vessel since the British failed to take Fort McHenry in 1812.¹⁰

The seaplane attacks were all made by the I-25 in June 1942, unsuccessfully attempting to induce massive forest fires in the Pacific Northwest by dropping a total of four incendiary bombs. Originally considering an attack on a major city in retaliation for the Doolittle raid, the Japanese settled on the forest fire plan-most likely to avoid the interception of the aircraft and additional lost face.¹¹

The final Japanese attempt at striking the U.S. came with the balloon barrage. Nine thousand hydrogen-filled incendiary and anti-personnel bomb-bearing balloons started arriving in November 1944 via the jetstream from Japan to the West Coast. Of the ten percent of the balloons that reached their designated target areas, very little damage was caused. Ironically, several Japanese bombs came close to the Hanford atomic bomb factory in south-central Washington state; while one hung on a nearby power line, cutting off power to the Hanford project momentarily.¹² The only casualties from enemy action in the continental U.S. occurred when six civilians were killed trying to pick up an unexploded balloon bomb near Bly, Oregon.¹³ Government censorship had prevented news of the balloon bombs from reaching the media until this tragedy.¹⁴

Why Early 1942 was the only Window of Opportunity for a
Coordinated Offensive

Numerous factors combined to make the window of opportunity for an effective campaign against the continental U.S. the six-month period after the American entry into the war in December 1941. That month, the U.S. North Atlantic Coastal commander, Admiral Adolphus Andrews reported to Admiral Ernest King that should a submarine offensive begin he would not have adequate forces to act.¹⁵ In February 1942 the Nazi U-boat commander, Admiral Karl Doenitz reported to Hitler that the U.S. coast was undefended, eventually inspiring Operation Pastorius.¹⁶ In May 1942, Doenitz predicted the development of the convoy system and the reversal of German fortunes. By August 1942, he reported that the necessary changes had already been made by the Americans to frustrate the U-boat offensive.¹⁷

After the April 1942 raid on Tokyo by General Doolittle the U.S. took positive steps to defend against a reciprocal Japanese raid. In May 1942, the Army sent twenty thousand more soldiers and doubled its fighter and bomber force on the West Coast.¹⁸ By June 1942, measures were taken to protect U.S. industry from attack. The Army moved 7,000 soldiers to protect the gates and locks of Michigan's Soo Canals, through which nine tenths of the nation's iron ore passed. A string

of radar stations and aircraft observers were set up across the province of Ontario to watch for bombers and paratroop drops, while the Coast Artillery floated barrage balloons around key western shipyards and factories.¹⁹ Therefore, by June 1942 the U.S. had taken sufficient measures to beat back the U-boat offensive and protect its industry, coasts and airspace against Axis attack. The window of opportunity was closed.

How They Could Have Done It

"A campaign plan orients on the enemy's center of gravity and achieves simultaneous and synchronized employment of all available land, sea, air and special operations assets..."²⁰

Axis leaders correctly identified the U.S. centers of gravity as its industrial might and the will of the American people, yet their critical error was in not conducting a bona fide campaign against them. The designation of a theater commander on both the German and Japanese command staffs would have made a focused effort possible while serving to increase coordination between the two nations for a simultaneous, asymmetric offensive.

The aspect of Axis offensive operations that contained the highest likelihood of affecting the outcome of the war was the submarine offensive. While the Germans conducted an effective

U-boat offensive, Hitler lost sight of the strategic objective and did not act upon his stated theory that he confided to his Navy leaders in 1942 that "the submarine war will in the end decide the outcome of the war."²¹ Instead he rejected Admiral Doenitz's request for twenty-five units to prosecute the offensive and released only five. The remaining twenty were held in reserve to counter a possible British move against Norway.²² The Japanese had nine submarines off the U.S. West Coast since shortly after Pearl Harbor that operated with as much impunity as the Germans did on the East Coast. The combined force of twenty-five German and nine Japanese units waging asymmetric, unrestricted submarine warfare against an undefended U.S. coastline could have been the foundation of a combined Axis naval offensive. Based on the success achieved by the limited German attempts at mining the East Coast, this naval offensive would be well accompanied by a massive, coordinated mining offensive along both coasts. For the additional price of the twenty U-boats requested by Admiral Doenitz, plentiful and inexpensive mines and the staff to coordinate the effort, the Axis powers may well have changed the outcome of the war. The price of reallocating these limited resources would have been worth paying for the strategic benefit gained.

Based on the reports of returning U-boat commanders after the first month of the five unit submarine offensive in February 1942, German logistics expert's analysis concluded that it would take 30,000 aerial bombing missions to destroy an equivalent amount of equipment.²³ Thus, a massive U-boat offensive could have substituted until the envisioned Operation Felix secured air bases in the Azores from which to conduct a strategic bombing campaign against the U.S. East Coast.²⁴ On the West Coast, Doolittle-style raids from an aircraft carrier or the redirection of sustained seaplane raids from the Northwest forests to the California cities would have served as direct action against the will of the American people in lieu of the ability to bomb strategically. The panic resulting from the actual shelling incidents was evidence of the effectiveness and psychological impact of the asymmetric nature of this effort. Carrier and seaplane air raids should have continued until the deployment of the eighteen-unit I-400 class of submarines, each carrying three seaplanes (or *Ohka* rocket-powered suicide-bombs planned toward the end of the war) and built for the purpose of an attack on the Panama Canal.²⁵ Numerous U.S. locations with strategic or shock value could have been added to the target list after the Canal locks were struck.

The third leg of the Axis offensive triad would have been an expanded commando insertion offensive. Even after the failure of Operation Pastorius the Germans maintained the qualified manpower, military intelligence and ability to insert to repeat the attempt numerous times. Operation Pastorius should have been the model for a simultaneous, coordinated effort by the Japanese in the West. Teams could have been inserted by submarine and the U.S. could have been divided into East/West sectors with the Mississippi River as the border. The small manpower requirement for these operations was well worth the potential strategic damage to American industry and will to fight.

Axis Failures

The Axis offensive against the United States failed primarily due to the lack of a campaign plan to guide it. No attempt was made to unify or devote adequate resources to the offensive effort, particularly with respect to the submarine war-which was recognized by the leadership for its strategic value and operational success. Inadequate attempts were made at striking at U.S. centers of gravity, which were vulnerable and within the operational capability of the Axis militaries. These included sabotage and commando raids against industry and terror/psychological raids against the American will to

fight. Finally, they failed to act while the opportunity existed from December 1941 to June 1942.

Implications for Today

Many of the lessons learned from the spectrum of Axis attacks on the continental United States during World War II are still applicable today. In retrospect, the U-boat offensive was the only one that came close to turning the tide of the war in the Axis favor. Today, the United States remains as weak as it was in 1942 with respect to coastal and shallow water ASW, particularly against the diesel submarine.

"Due to the prohibitive cost of nuclear-powered submarines, most force-building nations are buying diesel submarines. Recent advances have made it possible for diesel boats to recharge their batteries while remaining completely submerged, instead of having to expose a snorkel to enemy search radar. This tactical windfall mends the former Achilles heel of the diesel submarine, and portends a complete revision of anti-diesel search techniques which have been honed for over sixty years."²⁶

This would include an exponential increase in the advantage of the submarine over the Maritime Patrol aircraft, a current U.S. strength and an effective WW II counter to the U-boat. Amazingly, with the proliferation of this diesel threat USN tactics, capability and force structure continue to focus on the blue-water nuclear submarine threat. Exacerbating the problem, the U.S. attack submarine force is programmed to level off at thirty units in the next two decades.²⁷ The

modern day Coast Guard has little to no ASW capability and would only be able to provide port security and WW II-styled beach patrols. U-boat operations in the Jacksonville area offer a chilling reminder of the threat. The impunity with which the U-boats inserted commandos at Ponte Vedra Beach, mined the port and sunk merchant shipping in the channel forces us to ask the question of whether this could be done again by a contemporary foe. One with a modern fleet of numerous, inexpensive diesel submarines could provide a repeat performance of the Nazi offensive.

The U.S. remains vulnerable to an offensive mining campaign. While this was a major Cold War concern, the threat has not receded with the demise of the Soviet threat due to the worldwide proliferation and affordability of mines and the submarines to deploy them. A simple mining offensive could handily close U.S. ports, notably the surface ship bases at Norfolk and Mayport. USN shortcomings in Mine Countermeasures (MCM) are well documented and offer little hope that the ports could be opened in a timely manner. A Persian Gulf War planning assumption that maintained that SLOC's to the Southwest Asia Theater would remain open will be a luxury in a future conflict where they are cut at their source in U.S. home waters.

Terror attacks inside the continental U.S. offer a lucrative area for a potential opponent to capitalize on a coordinated offensive. Our present information-oriented culture would inhibit the government censorship that dulled the Axis attempts at terror and psychological warfare against the American people in WW II. A World Trade Center type of series of bombings is clearly within the reach of a hostile organization and can be paralyzing to any future war efforts. Although almost unthinkable, a barrage of balloons from Asia, this time carrying chemical or biological weapons, could cause widespread panic and destruction. U.S. industry remains vulnerable to attack and a smart potential enemy can strike a blow to it before we could ramp up to a wartime economy. This situation is made worse by the merger of defense industry corporations and the shrinking of the defense industrial base, providing consolidated sabotage targets. One-half of the U.S. submarine production capability and all of the U.S. aircraft carrier production capability can be neutralized with a strike on the shipyard at Newport News, Virginia.

The Caribbean remains the neglected theater of United States defense attention much as it did in 1942. "In World War Two and today, the Caribbean is the outer defense ring covering the soft underbelly of the United States, as well as being the lynchpin for control of the central Atlantic."²⁸ By

the end of 1942, 36% of Allied shipping losses had taken place in this soft underbelly and our reliance on the southern sea-lanes has not diminished.²⁹ Unfortunately, permanent U.S. Navy bases in the region have been reduced to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The inability of a U.S. Joint Inter-Agency Task Force (JIATF) to win the war on drugs offers a regional case in point of just how soft our southern flank is.

A regional CINC responsible for the defense of the homeland should coordinate the effort to protect U.S. coasts, airspace, national will and industrial capability from attack. Using geographic location, current regional boundaries and threat load as criteria, the logical choice for this tasking is CINC Atlantic Command (USACOM). A standing OPLAN or CONPLAN for the defense of the homeland should be developed, as we may not be able to afford a six-month window of enemy opportunity against future adversaries as we did in 1942.

Moreover, we may not have yet heard the last U.S. President repeat the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "The broad oceans which have been heralded in the past as our protection from attack have become endless battlefields on which we are constantly being challenged by our enemies."³⁰ These words were ironically spoken at almost exactly the same minute as

the first enemy shells were landing on the continental U.S. in World War II, fired from the Japanese submarine I-17.

NOTES

¹ Milan Vego and Robert Strahan, comp., Operational Art Historical Companion (Newport, RI: The United States Naval War College, 1998), 114.

² "Navy Tardy in Driving Off U-Boats," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, August 1947.

³ Eugene Rachlis, They Came To Kill (New York: Random House 1961), 11.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Charles Wighton and Gunter Peis, Hitler's Spies and Saboteurs (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1958), 51.

⁶ Theodore Taylor, Fire on the Beaches (New York: W. W. Norton and Company 1958).

⁷ James R. Chiles, "How We Got Ready for a War We Never Fought," Smithsonian, December 1988.

⁸ Edward Baumann and John O'Brien, "The Enemy Within," The Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine, 22 September 1985, p.32 Zone C.

⁹ "Nazi Plan Sank 50 Years Ago," The Saint Petersburg Times, 16 June 1992, 1a.

¹⁰ Theodore L. Gatchel, "Axis Attacks on the Continental U.S.," Sea Combat, August 1979, 78.

¹¹ Theodore Taylor, Fire on the Beaches (New York: W. W. Norton and Company 1958), 211.

¹² John B. Penfold, "Japan's Rambling Balloon Barrage," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, August 1947.

¹³ Theodore L. Gatchel, "Axis Attacks on the Continental U.S.," Sea Combat, August 1979, 78.

¹⁴ James R. Chiles, "How We Got Ready for a War We Never Fought," Smithsonian, December 1988.

¹⁵ Theodore Taylor, Fire on the Beaches (New York: W. W. Norton and Company 1958), 47.

¹⁶ Edwin P. Hoyt, U-Boats Offshore (New York: Stein and Day Publishers 1978), 150.

¹⁷ "Navy Tardy in Driving Off U-Boats," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, August 1947.

¹⁸ James R. Chiles, "How We Got Ready for a War We Never Fought," Smithsonian, December 1988.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine For Planning Joint Operations (Joint Pub 5-0) (Washington, D.C.: April 13, 1995), II-18.

²¹ "Navy Tardy in Driving Off U-Boats," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, August 1947.

²² Gaylord T. M. Kelshall, The U-boat War in the Caribbean (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1994), 13.

²³ Edwin P. Hoyt, U-Boats Offshore (New York: Stein and Day Publishers 1978), 43.

²⁴ F. H. Hinsley, Hitler's Strategy (London: Cambridge University Press 1951), 148.

²⁵ Theodore L. Gatchel, "Axis Attacks on the Continental U.S.," Sea Combat, August 1979, 79.

²⁶ William A. Doney and Steve Deal, "Bring Back ASW-Now!" U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, March 1999.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gaylord T. M. Kelshall, The U-boat War in the Caribbean (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1994), xiii.

²⁹ Ibid., xiv.

³⁰ Theodore L. Gatchel, "Axis Attacks on the Continental U.S.," Sea Combat, August 1979, 47.

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